

## Belgian immigration

Belgians were among the earliest settlers in colonial North America, although they immigrated in significant numbers only between 1820 and 1920. In the U.S. census of 2000 and the Canadian census of 2001, 360,642 Americans and 129,780 Canadians claimed Belgian descent. Because Belgians assimilated more quickly than many immigrant groups, there are few distinct Belgian communities in North America. In the United States, the greatest concentrations are in Michigan and Wisconsin. In Canada, Belgians are widely dispersed throughout the country, with Ontario having the largest provincial population and Montreal having the largest urban population.

Belgium occupies 11,700 square miles of western Europe between 49 and 52 degrees north latitude. A coastline on the North Sea forms its northern border along with the Netherlands. Germany and Luxembourg lie to the east and France to the west. The land is mostly flat. In 2002, the population of Belgium was estimated at 10,258,762, three-quarters of which practice Roman Catholicism. The remaining quarter is Protestant. Dutch-speaking Flemings make up 55 percent of the population and inhabit the north. The other major ethnic group is the French-speaking Walloons, who make up another third of the population and inhabit the southern regions. Ethnic tension continues to cause political conflict and led the parliament to federalize the government in 1993.

Belgium was first settled by Celts and then frequently conquered, beginning with the Romans under Julius Caesar. Thereafter the Franks, Burgundy, Spain, Austria, and France controlled the region until Belgium was made part of the Netherlands in 1815. In 1624, Walloon Protestants migrated to New Holland (later NEW YORK) seeking greater religious freedom, though these early colonial migrants were few. A few Belgian artisans also settled in NEW FRANCE after 1663. Belgium gained independence in 1830, when its territorial integrity was guaranteed by the major powers. Economic opportunity, however, far outweighed religious or political factors in the choice of poor Belgian farmers to emigrate. With Belgium rapidly growing and in the vanguard of the European Industrial Revolution, farmers were rapidly displaced and after 1840 were encouraged by their governments to emigrate, though more than 80 percent chose to stay in Europe prior to the 1880s. About 63,000 Belgians came to the United States before 1900 and another 75,000 between 1900 and 1920. As many as 18,000 Walloons may first have migrated to Canada before crossing over into the

United States. Prior to 1910, there were fewer than 10,000 Belgians in Canada, but another 20,000 arrived before 1930, with most settling in Manitoba and the prairie provinces. In the Canadian IMMIGRATION ACT of 1869, Belgians were listed as a "preferred" group, and their farmers remained in high demand. After 1930, immigrants were more frequently artisans, skilled workers, or professionals. Though many Belgians in both the United States and Canada assimilated quickly—the Flemings with the Dutch, and the Walloons with the French and French-Canadians—a Walloon-speaking enclave remained into the 21st century in the Door Peninsula of northeastern Wisconsin. By 1860, Belgians owned 80 percent of a three-county area northeast of Green Bay.

As a result of German invasions in 1914 and 1940, small numbers of Belgians were admitted to the United States and Canada as refugees during both World War I and World War II. The disruptions of World War II led large numbers of Belgians to seek economic opportunity in North America. Between 1945 and 1975, almost 40,000 immigrated to Canada and a similar number to the United States. From the 1980s, numbers were small, generally well below quotas, and most often represent well-educated professionals seeking career opportunities. Between 1992 and 2002, Belgian immigration to the United States averaged annually a little more than 600. Of 19,765 Belgian Canadians identified in the 2001 census, almost half immigrated prior to 1961, and only 2,185 between 1991 and 2001.

## Further Reading

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